Lost in transition? Emerging forms of residential architecture in Kathmandu

Urmic Sengupta a,⁎, Vibha Bhattarai Upadhyaya b

a School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering, Queen’s University Belfast, United Kingdom
b Institute for Culture and Society, University of Western Sydney, Sydney, Australia

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 29 August 2015
Received in revised form 1 November 2015
Accepted 9 November 2015
Available online 18 December 2015

Keywords:
Kathmandu
Urban transformation
Residential architecture
Tradition
Modernity

A B S T R A C T

Kathmandu has been the last few cities in the world which retained its medieval urban culture up until twentieth century. Various Hindu and Buddhist religious practices shaped the arrangement of houses, roads and urban spaces giving the city a distinctive physical form, character and a unique oriental nativeness. In recent decades, the urban culture of the city has been changing with the forces of urbanization and globalization and the demand for new buildings and spaces. New residential design is increasingly dominated by distinctive patterns of Western suburban ideal comprising detached or semi-detached homes and high-rise tower blocks. This architectural iconoclasm can be construed as a rather crude response to the indigenous spaces and builtform. The paper attempts to dismantle the current tension between traditional and contemporary ‘culture’ (and hence society) and housing (or builtform) in Kathmandu by engaging in a discussion that cuts across space, time and meaning of building. The paper concludes that residential architecture in Kathmandu today stands disorientated and lost in the transition.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Kathmandu has been one of the last few cities in the world which retained its medieval urban culture up until twentieth century (Aranya, 1991; Levy, 1992; Tiwari, 2001a, Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013). Various Hindu and Buddhist religious practices shaped the arrangement of houses, temples, stupas and urban spaces giving the city a distinctive physical form, character and a unique oriental nativeness. Unlike many medieval European cities Kathmandu didn’t have an industrial past. Its urban history therefore did not follow Mumford’s (1938) three technologically determined eras — the medieval city (“eotechnic age”), the industrial city (“paleotechnic age”), and the future (“biotechnic age”), or “post-industrial” city — that he used to define Western cities. Local historians such as Mahesh Chandra Regmi mark the year 1786 as the beginning of the ‘modern era’ in Nepal when Prithvi Narayan Shah (the first King of Unified Nepal) established Kathmandu as the capital. Regmi approached modernity through the historical analysis of chronological periods of various lengths and history of Royal dynasties that ruled Nepal. With unification the country saw a new form of political and economic governance but their ramifications rarely penetrated the society’s rich and illustrious culture for the next 200 years. People continued to work as farmers, artists and craftsmen; and kept their ties with the traditional occupations. The city was physically isolated due to high altitude and surrounding mountains. It remained politically and culturally insulated from both European and Persian sovereignties by resisting Muslim invasion in the 15th century and Colonial subjugation in the 18th century. Kathmandu retained its purity and timeless character almost as a frozen city that didn’t move, grow or change with time. It thus remained seemingly irresistible to Western scholars who admired the mystic, deep, religious and cultural roots of the city. Much earlier, William Kirkpatrick during his visit in 1793 described Kathmandu valley saying ‘there are nearly as many temples as houses and as many idols as inhabitants’ (Kirkpatrick, 1811, p. 150). According to his estimate, the city had about five thousand houses (Ibid: p. 150). Levy (1992), referring to Bhaktapur, an indigenous historic settlement, called it a mesocosm — an essential middle world situated between the individual microcosm and wider universe. Over the years, the clustered historic settlements in Kathmandu with a living urban culture have become a pilgrimage sites for scholars in architecture, planning and history (Gutschow and Kreutzmann, 2013)

The pursuit of modernity in Nepal effectively began with the redevelopment of the entire southern quarters of Juddha Sadak, a prominent street leading to the historic Durbar Square in Kathmandu, as part of the

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.11.007
0264-2751/© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

⁎ Corresponding author.

1 The state of Nepal came into existence in the 18th century when Prithvi Narayan Shah, a king from a small state of Gorkha, fought several battles to combine small feudatory states into one, including the Kathmandu Valley which was previously divided into three small kingdoms under the Malla rulers (11th–18th centuries). Prithvi Narayan Shah established Kathmandu as the capital of Nepal.

2 There have been many attempts of British invasion in Nepal and tales of braveries of Nepalese soldiers. The first attempt was the battle at Nalapani in 1814–16, followed by fierce attack in Jaitak. Both met with stubborn resistance eventually forcing British commanders to retreat (see, Northey and Morris, 1928)
rebuilding in the aftermath of 1934 earthquake. In 1955, Tribhuvan
International Airport was inaugurated, opening Kathmandu to the out-
side world. Simultaneously, the first city plan was prepared in 1969 and
Nepal Telecommunication office established in 1975, all of which would
further develop in the following decades and become trademark of mo-
dernity. Simply put, modernity signifies progress and development im-
plying something different from the language of ‘medieval’. The short
history of Kathmandu’s modernisation suggests that the city did not
quite follow Mumford’s three phases of civilization. It rather moved di-
rectly from eotechnic to biotechnic era. Much has changed in the last
few decades with the city’s buildings and spaces going through a rapid
change within a compressed timeframe. A confluence of multiple social,
ecological and cultural forces appear to influence this transition.

The changing urban landscape of the city today is attributed to the
material conditions of the 20th century with urbanization and globali-
zation emphasizing a ‘modern culture’ in architecture and lifestyle.
High profile palaces and monuments (such as the former palaces Singh
Durbar and Narayan Hiti Durbar, Durbar High School, Trichandra Col-
lege, Clock Tower and numerous courthouses) built under the influence
of neoclassical architecture during the Rana rule in the last century
herald a departure from traditional architecture, which manifests in its
extreme form in the new residential architecture. This trend, accelerat-
ed by the shift from owner-built housing to developer-built housing has
led to the creation of new forms, identity, and aesthetics. New residen-
tial design is dominated by distinctive patterns of Western suburban
ideal comprising paricthes of detached or semi-detached homes and
high-rise tower blocks. This architectural iconoclasm can be construed
as a rather crude, if not cataclysmic response to the indigenous spaces
— as a rather crude, if not cataclysmic response to the indigenous spaces
of emerging architectural forms

2. Distinct identity to unsettling modernity

The variegated history of the traditional architecture and builtform of
Kathmandu dates back to roughly 2000 years owing to various kings and
dynasties (such as Licchavis, Mallas, Ranas and Shahs lately) contributing
to city planning. Early history suggests a distinct progression and design
in different periods due to the city’s transitional location between India
and Tibet/China and cultural influence from both sides (Table 1). Building
and artistic activities, particularly from the Malla rule of the 15th and 16th
centuries — regarded as one of the glorious periods — gave Nepalese ar-
chitecture and builtform a strong identity. The effects of mutual rivalry of
the city kings, artistic development and competitive mercantile econo-
my on the cultural transformation reflected in the city’s layout, art and ar-
chitecture. Royal Palaces and Squares assumed the highest importance as
administrative, bureaucratic and religious spaces. These were also multi-
functional spaces implying an extended involvement of ‘Royal’ institu-
tions in the society. Whilst the traditional Royal towns exhibit an
organic growth over centuries, scholars (Tiwari, 2008; Müller, 1981)
argue that they are certainly not unplanned settlements despite absence
of wide roads, a common trait of planned settlements. The immediate
areas surrounding the Palaces were occupied by the elites, the people
from the higher castes. The lower castes lived outside the city walls. Dif-
frent parts of the city, especially district (Tol) were often noted for their
socio-economic characteristics due to the predominance of one caste-
based stratification such as Nay Tol, Pore Tol and Brahm Tul manifested
in the spatial structure of the city (Shrestha, 1981). These references
also imply that the importance of the district — Tol declined with distance
from the city centre (Wright, 1877).

The art and architecture that prospered in the three city states in Kathmandu suggest their rulers’ passionate involvement in building
temples, monuments and public spaces, in art, astronomy and mysti-
cism, all of which would be deeply etched in the lifestyle of the people.

---

1 Class hierarchy is the stratification of the society largely based on the traditional occupa-
tions of the people in the Kathmandu valley.

2 Kathmandu valley had three kingdoms, Kathmandu, Bhaktapur and Lalitpur (Patan).
دریافت فوری متن کامل مقاله

امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات